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FBI sets up unit to probe news leaks

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The FBI has assigned some of its more experienced agents to a special unit that is probing unauthorized disclosures to reporters.

The new four-man unit was started earlier this year in the FBI's Washington field office.

To enhance professionalism, several superb agents were assigned to investigations of leaks, according to former FBI special agent Dana Caro, who set up the team before he left the FBI.

The team currently is investigating "17 or 18" cases, said Stephen Raimey, a spokesman for the Washington field office.

Mr. Caro said he created the unit because leak investigations previously have been conducted individually under several supervisors.

"We have not greatly increased the numbers of hours worked, but we have isolated it to four people rather than 15 having a piece of the pie,"

said Mr. Caro. "I codified a lot of disciplines under one supervisor." The unit is part of the office's domestic terrorism squad.

Mr. Caro said he decided to institute the reorganization several weeks after becoming head of the FBI's Washington field office last January. He said he decided on his own to establish the unit, and he emphasized it was not set up in response to any rash of leaked news stories.

Mr. Caro retired from the FBI last month and is now in private business.

While the specialized squad is new, bureau agents have long been involved in investigations of unauthorized disclosures to the news media. Mr. Caro said he does not know of any other FBI office that has set up a team to do the work.

The New York Times reported yesterday congressional and administration officials said the team was

formed mainly in reaction to criticism that inquiries were handled by agents who worked too slowly and lacked sophistication in complex national security issues.

Intelligence officials have said they are trying to prevent news reporting of some secrets already obtained by the Soviet Union, because it might corroborate data from spies the Soviets mistrusted and also tip off less sophisticated adversaries.

President Reagan has said his administration is obligated by law to prosecute anyone, including reporters, who make information public that could harm national security.

The government has conducted leak investigations for several decades, but just one has led to a criminal conviction. In that case, a Navy analyst, Samuel Loring Morison, was convicted of espionage last year for providing a classified photograph to a magazine.